

# Farmers Helping Farmers

South Puget Sound (Pierce, south King, Mason, Kitsap, Thurston counties)

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## FSA committee member bridges federal programs with community needs

Joy Garitone raises sheep on Washington’s Kitsap Peninsula, and for many years only participated in one minor program with the Farm Service Agency (FSA). Garitone wanted to get more involved with FSA but didn’t grow commodities that would take advantage of more programs.

In the early 1990s, Garitone became a field technician with the Kitsap County Conservation District. Working at the District allowed her to learn more about the FSA County Committee and the agency by attending the meetings as a technical advisor and motivated her to serve. Garitone ran three or four times before being elected and is now in the middle of her first term.

Representing Pierce, King, Kitsap, Thurston and Mason counties, the committee meets in the Puyallup U.S. Department of Agriculture Service Center.

“Part of the committee’s task is to get the programs out into the community,” Garitone said.

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Still an employee with the Conservation District, Garitone said that being able to bridge the two organizations has been very beneficial.

“Being on the committee has helped me understand the programs, and I hope that my experiences with the District can help the committee with what the programs mean ‘on-the-ground,’” she said.

The FSA has a two-pronged mission: on one side it oversees a portfolio of programs dealing with disaster assistance, conservation practices, revenue assistance and some crop insurance. The agency also makes loans to farmers and ranchers for annual operating expenses, purchasing or expanding agricultural operations and emergency loans to repair natural disaster damage.

The three-to-five person committees are the place that producers can appeal most agency decisions. Committees also make decisions which help to determine program payments. The committees meet approximately once a month. Voting in the annual committee election helps guarantee the committee truly represents the agricultural producers in each county and is a knowledgeable group of producers.

The rest of the committee is made up of cattle, hay, and vegetable producers.

Dealing with issues surrounding smaller farms and ranches has been a high point for the committee. Producers on these small parcels are trying to balance conservation, program and production issues, and working with them has been a positive experience, Garitone said.

Each county committee draws its members from local administrative areas. Counties are bro-

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## South Puget Sound Committee Continued

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ken up into administrative areas for the purposes of voting. Local administrative areas encompass similar agriculture or geographic areas. Nominated by local farmers and ranchers, candidates must live in the county or local administrative area they will represent and must be eligible to vote in the county election. Members serve on staggered

three-year terms so that one-third of the seats are up for re-election each year, and producers can serve for nine years. After more than 70 years, the county committee structure remains a cornerstone of FSA's efforts to preserve and promote American agriculture, said George Jaquish, Pierce County FSA Executive Director.

"I hope that the person who may take over after my third term is pedal-to-the-metal about getting people interested in FSA and its programs," Garitone said.